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ABSTRACT

This discussion describes standards developed by Villa Julie College (Maryland) to avoid arbitrarily designating courses as "upper-level." Initially the school established a double concept of quality: either the absolute or "floor" sense (taken from minimum standards of accreditation) or the relative or "ceiling" sense (established on consultation with bodies within the college community). Three models of the upper-level course were identified: first, courses requiring sequential prerequisites; second, courses requiring no prerequisites but appropriate only for those with some subject familiarity; and third, courses requiring non-sequential prerequisites. Consequently Villa Julie accepted the following six macroscopic requirements for upper level courses: (1) be sufficient in number; (2) contribute to program coherence; (3) contribute to relationship of programs to college community and society; (4) cast balance between depth and breadth; (5) contribute to balance between student's time spent on the major and not on the major; (6) stand in balance with the lower-level courses. Additionally, microscopic requirements for each upper-level course suggested the need for: differences from lower-level courses in quality and quantity in contents and requirements; assumption of either a prerequisite or subject background; having the student employ analysis, synthesis, interpretation, critical thinking, and fine discriminations; assuming student independence and responsibility; and assuming that students will be mature enough to allow class focus on content. Thirty-one references are included. (JB)

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MAKING THE UPPER-LEVEL COURSE "UPPER-LEVEL"[1]

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I. INTRODUCTION

In any curriculum each course must be designed within the appropriate context of the curriculum. Without a sound policy a college offering the baccalaureate degree could assign a 300- or 400-level course number in an arbitrary fashion. Such arbitrary labelling could threaten the quality of education and the reputation of the college. It is surprising, therefore, that a survey of the literature on education yields little, if anything, about upper-level courses as such.[2]

As a member of Villa Julie College's curriculum committee I have been working on the problem of articulating guidelines for developing and evaluating upper-level courses. The work continues, taking into account curricular theories and curricular practice. This paper offers some observations concerning the problem of making the upper-level course "upper-level."

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[1]This is a revised version of a paper presented at The National Seminar for Successful College Teaching, sponsored by The Institute of Higher Education and the Division of Continuing Education, University of Florida, and the Center for Higher Education, University of North Texas -- Orlando, March 1989.

[2] Compare Elizabeth Coleman's remarks concerning the nature of a 100-level course. Coleman 201.

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II. PROVISO

This paper raises two questions: What is an upper-level course? and What are the means and criteria for establishing quality in an upper-level course? A partial answer which will guide the rest of the paper is that there is no ideal definition, nor even a set of necessary and sufficient conditions which any course must satisfy in order to be upper-level. There seems to be nothing in the literature which shows this directly, but we can see this by examining the field of curriculum study in general.[3]

Obviously any upper-level course ought to support and reflect the program of which it is part. But identifying the key to this relation seems unlikely, given the many competing curriculum theories. Among the theoretical considerations, for example, there is not only the explicit curriculum (what the school says it offers), but also the implicit curriculum (expectations or goals which are not part of the explicit curriculum, but are learned by the student as part of the learning experience) and the "null" curriculum (what the school does not teach) (Flinders, Nodings, and Thornton 34; also see Bergenhenegouwen 535-536). In another vein, we must weigh the advantages of the measured or "technological" curriculum, apparently the current favorite, against several other conceptions which either compete with or complement the concept of the measured curriculum: e.g. academic rationalist, cognitive

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[3] Assuming that the field is neither moribund nor nonexistent, as some have suggested. See Klein 1.

processes, self-actualization, and social reconstruction.[4] Reflecting the variety of theories about the levels and types of curricula are the various schemes for curricular planning (Conrad and Pratt 29; Zenger and Zenger 44-45; Donald 208; and Patton and Polloway 276-280).

Even where there is consensus about fundamental principles of curriculum development, room for interpretation concerning the nature and application of these principles discourages any quest for the definitive upper-level course. For example, perhaps the two most common concepts in theories about the baccalaureate program are depth and breadth, but it is difficult to decide just what is meant by such concepts. John Z. Smith argues that depth may be defined in terms of the total curriculum or in terms of the subject matter (2). The American Association of Colleges (AAC) defines depth in terms of an individual course of study (26). Dressel suggests four different concepts of breadth: major divisions of knowledge; major problems and some proposed solutions; major systems of value and different cultures; and distinctive methodologies of various disciplines (33; cf. Smith 13; Lockwood 44; and Boyer and Ahlgren 430).

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[4] These five constitute Eisner's and Vallance's Conflicting Conceptions of the Curriculum. Klein argues that the five are not in conflict (32-35); Vallance recently added two more conceptions (27). Also see Short who describes nine historical views, each of which is weighted against the measured curriculum (4-8); and see Berman (42), Frymier (59-61), Doll (16), Zais (20), and Zaret (46-47), all of whom reject the measured curriculum in favor of other models.

As for descriptions of curricula already in place, consider Levine's distinction among four types of curriculum: credit-based (requiring a prescribed amount of hours of study), integrated (requiring a complete program, not broken down into units: e.g. St.John's College's Great Books Program), progress by exam (using CLEP, for example), and competency-based (requiring achievement of certain learning outcomes rather than amassing a number of credits: e.g. Alverno College) (Handbook 32-33). Levine also recognizes three purposes for the major, to which Dressel adds a fourth: the non-preparatory major (e.g. general studies), the major taken as preparation for graduate school (e.g. philosophy), the occupational major (e.g. nursing), and the professional undergraduate major (e.g. pre-med) (Levine Handbook 28; Dressel 38). And Levine lists four types of majors: disciplinary (e.g. English), interdisciplinary (e.g. American Studies), double (e.g. English and Psychology), and student-created (e.g. University of Minnesota's "University Without Walls) (Handbook 34-35).

This is not the time for arguing the merits of one curriculum theory over another, nor for deciding whether the various descriptions are correct and complete. It is enough to note the rich variety --and the chance that more than one view is reasonable, depending on context-- and to abandon hope, on that account, of locating the definitive upper-level course.

But the absence of a definitive upper-level course is no reason to abandon the discussion. The same variety of theories and descriptions which precludes an ideal definition may help to

establish a set of assumptions and guidelines for determining whether a course is "upper-level." Toward this end, we may profit from Levine's contention that quality, with respect to baccalaureate programs, has two senses, both of which apply to four-year programs ("Quality" 14-15). There is the absolute or "floor" sense, "a single, unwavering, uncompromising standard, a universal by which all baccalaureate programs can be evaluated." And there is the relative or "ceiling" sense, quality as a "measure of the best a particular institution can achieve." Even when considering the nature and quality of its upper-level courses individually, each college may find Levine's metaphor doubly useful. First is the encouragement to maintain the "floor" of each upper-level course, by staying in touch with the principles and practices of educators, schools, and programs. Second is the encouragement to engage in creative construction of the "ceiling" relative to the college's particular needs, mission, and programs (also see NIE 15 and Bennett 20).

III. "UPPER-LEVEL"

In the absence of a definitive upper-level course we may seek a working concept, or set of concepts which enables us to discuss and implement ways of meeting both objective requirements (the "floor") and institutional requirements (the "ceiling").

To begin we may identify at least three models of upper-level courses. Each of these models is a legitimate representation of "upper-levelness" and each could be applicable within most colleges' contexts.

a. The Three Models

MODEL 1: The most common form of an upper-level course is one which depends on sequential prerequisites. For instance, at Villa Julie, IS (Information Systems) 304-Advanced Business Programming has as a prerequisite IS 222-COBOL II, IS 222 has as a prerequisite IS 220-COBOL I, and IS 220 has as prerequisites IS 210-Introduction to Programming and IS 110-Fundamentals of Information Systems. Thus, we can demonstrate in strictly quantitative terms that IS 304 is an upper-level course. The course requires twelve credits of previous work in a sequence. The sequence involves courses building on each other. So IS 304 is an upper-level course by virtue of its being a fifth three-credit course in a sequence of three-credit courses.

MODEL 2: A second type of upper-level course is one requiring no prerequisites. Where Model 1 may be discussed pretty much in quantitative terms, Model 2 can be discussed only in qualitative terms. At The Johns Hopkins University, for instance, the 400- and 500-level courses in philosophy are open to undergraduates and graduates; only a few of these courses have specific prerequisites, some presuppose familiarity with philosophy--but no specific course, and several have no prerequisites at all. Further, many of the 400-level courses are described as introductory courses. Yet there is a difference between a lower-level philosophy course and an upper-level philosophy course, as is apparent to anyone who has experienced

both. For example, as a graduate student at Hopkins, I took a 400-level "Introduction" to Aristotle, which would have been too difficult a course for the typical freshman or sophomore.[5]

MODEL 3: The third type of upper-level course falls between the two extremes just mentioned. It rests on what might be called "non-sequential" prerequisites. For example, at Villa Julie, PHIL 320-Aesthetics requires one lower-level philosophy course, but no lower-level philosophy course requires any other. PHIL 340-Social and Political Philosophy requires third-year status. And PHIL 420-Seminar in Philosophy of Artificial Intelligence requires IS 103-Fundamentals of Microcomputing and PHIL 104-Logic. These courses differ from lower-level courses in their greater expectations of student preparation and student responsibility for his or her own learning. But PHIL 320 and PHIL 420 require no sequence of philosophy courses and PHIL 340 requires no other philosophy course at all. Each course, however, presupposes that the student has taken one or more courses of a certain kind, and this is indicated by the prerequisite.

b. Tests for Quality

How might we test the quality of these models? Take the first model. Even if we agree that IS 304 should be an upper-level course by virtue of its position in the IS sequence, we still want to know if it is doing its upper-level job. In this

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[5] Responding to this paper, Professor Thomas Moeller of Mary Washington College has suggested that William Perry's forms of intellectual and ethical development might be relevant here. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the comment deserves further considertation. See Perry 28-40.

specific instance we assume that the earlier courses prepare the student for IS 304, and that IS 304 prepares the student for any succeeding courses that have IS 304 as a prerequisite. We might apply this assumption to all upper-level courses in the MODEL 1 category. Also, in the case of Information Systems courses we can consult the model curriculum of the Data Processing Management Association, but such standards are not available for every program (DPMA 6-29).

In the case of the other two models, those which are not subject merely to quantitative measures, matters are not so simple. Thus we may benefit both from developing our own list of assumptions about and requirements for upper-level courses and from deciding how to ensure the satisfaction of the requirements.

One useful example may be the work Villa Julie's curriculum committee has done on a list of assumptions and requirements. This list is a distillation of relevant views on curriculum theory; successful curriculum practices in other colleges; minimum standards which Villa Julie must follow to receive program endorsement, approval, or accreditation; and conclusions drawn from the college's own evaluation of its programs and courses.

Within the past few years a great deal has been written about curricular quality. Notable among these are the views of Henery Rosovsky, the AAC, the NIE, William Bennett, and Arthur Levine. These works include sets of minimum standards for determining curricular quality (Scully 1; AAC 18-24; NIE 14-15;

Bennett 16; and Levine "Quality" 16). Of course, many other theories preclude the possibility of minimum standards or preclude the specific sets of standards mentioned in these works. But these sets are the results of a great deal of careful thinking about the current state of curricular affairs and they seem generally to convey understanding about what is right or wrong with today's college curricula.

There is little point listing the standards here. However, it is worth noting several concepts which these views have in common, either explicitly or implicitly. We have already noted the requirements of breadth and depth. To these we may add the need for coherence or cohesion, sequence, integration, continuity, and the maximization of the student's learning experiences. This last, as Lockwood notes, includes "everything on campus, not just the courses in the catalog" (Lockwood 42; Also see AAC 24; NIE 17-19; and Dressel 30).

As for successful curriculum practices, we have already noted various types of curriculum, purposes for the major, and types of major. There our purpose was to acknowledge the variety of possibly acceptable curricula and types of upper-level courses. Here the point is that several successful models of curricula exist, from which we may glean either general rules or support for further assumptions.

An additional comment is in order in this vein: we must not confuse "upper-level" with "major." Early specialization and advanced general electives may be legitimate for some programs as

in, for example, a program where the student gets his technical training first, and his general liberal arts second (Dressel 84; Spurr 27-28; Bennett 20; and Coleman 200-202).[6] In fact, there appear to be at least three possible ways to design the major in relationship to the general courses, and each of these ways is legitimate if it suits the program. One design has the students taking their general courses first, and their major (specialized) courses second. In this case the upper-level courses are usually the major courses. In the second design, the major track and the general track run parallel to each other throughout the four years. In this case upper-level courses would include both major and general subjects. In the third design the major courses are taken first, while the general courses are taken second. In this case the majority of upper-level courses would be general courses.[7]

The minimum standards which Villa Julie must follow to receive program endorsement, approval, or accreditation, include those developed by the following organizations.

First, at the institutional level, Villa Julie must satisfy the accrediting standards of the Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools. The Association does not accredit

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[6] We shall leave for another discussion the questions concerning the value of offering lower-level courses in the student's final two years and of offering upper-level courses in the student's first two years.

[7] Also see Lewis and Farris (15, A-13) for statistics comparing schools in which students take their general education requirements in either the lower division or upper division only, or in both divisions.

individual programs, but it is difficult to imagine receiving accreditation as a school without having acceptable programs. And it is difficult to imagine a program passing muster unless its courses are appropriate.

Second, Villa Julie, in order to offer four-year programs at all, had to satisfy the minimum requirements of the Maryland State Board for Higher Education (SBHE) for four-year institutions. Since then the college has had to submit each four-year program for endorsement. The SBHE pre-endorsement review includes a course by course evaluation.[8]

Third, where applicable Villa Julie seeks the accrediting of its individual professional programs by professional associations. For example, the American Bar Association has endorsed the college's Paralegal program.

By satisfying these authorities the "floor" is complete. To satisfy these authorities is to satisfy a reasonably stringent set of minimum requirements. The erecting of the "ceiling" takes place with the assistance of several groups, at several levels, within the college. These groups include the following.

First, most of the college's programs have advisory boards: groups of successful professionals representing the world in which the students hope to prosper. These boards guide the college through program development and implementation in general, and course development and implementation in particular.

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[8] Recently the SBHE was replaced by the Maryland Higher Education Commission (MHEC). The Commission's program review promises to be at least as rigorous.

They do so by using their own experiences both as descriptive and as prescriptive guides.

Second, each individual program is scrutinized by the faculty involved.

Third, nothing curricular happens at Villa Julie without the knowledge and guidance of its administration: the board of trustees, the president, the dean, and the division chairmen.

Fourth, the curriculum committee evaluates each course and each program from its proposal through its implementation, and it does so in the "responsive and resistant" spirit advocated by the AAC (15).

Fifth, individual teachers are expected to design their courses in accordance with the aims of the college and in accordance with the level and title of the course. Teachers demonstrate this to the dean through their syllabi and their teaching strategies.

Sixth, students frequently offer valuable input, either informally or formally, concerning the quality of individual courses and programs.

In sum, to maintain quality in the absolute, or "floor," sense, there are the Middle States Association, the SBHE, and the various professional associations. To maintain quality in the relative, or "ceiling," sense, there are the Advisory Boards, Villa Julie's administration, faculty members as a group, the curriculum committee, individual faculty members, and students. Having gotten an upper-level course through all of these, we may

assume that evidence of the quality of the course is much stronger than evidence to the contrary.

On the basis of the relevant curricular views, successful curriculum practices, minimum standards, and internal quality controls, Villa Julie has accepted the following assumptions (serving also as requirements) concerning the upper-level courses.

In macroscopic terms, the upper-level courses should,

1. Be sufficient in number;[9]

2. Contribute to the coherence of the program;

3. Contribute to a healthy relationship of the program to the college community and to the society which is served by the community (Lockwood 41);

4. Help cast the balance between depth and breadth (Levine Handbook 47; Bennett 17; NIE 9,43);

5. Contribute to a proper balance between a student's time spent on the major and time not spent on the major;[10]

6. Stand in balance with the lower-level courses

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[9] For the baccalaureate, the SBHE requires a minimum of fifteen upper-level credits in residence.

[10] Of course these first five apply to lower-level courses as well, so they do not help us make the distinction between lower-
and upper-level.

In microscopic terms, each upper-level course should,

1. Assume differences from the lower-level courses in terms of quality and in quantity in the course contents and requirements;[11]

2. Assume either a prerequisite for the course or that the student has attained in some way a sufficient background for the course;

3. Require that the student employ analysis, synthesis, interpretation, critical thinking, and the ability to make finer discriminations;

4. Be handled in such a way that the student is more independent and responsible;

5. Assume that the student has the ability to handle the material to the extent that the class may focus on the content and not on the methods of or approaches to studying the material.

IV. CONCLUSION

What is an upper-level course? There is no simple answer, no one ideal upper-level course. This paper has suggested three models; they are of course neither mutually exclusive, nor exhaustive. What are the means and criteria for establishing quality in an upper-level course? Minimum standards for curricular quality in general, which have been established by

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[11] While this appears to beg the question, it does so only if taken in isolation, rather than as a part of a set of criteria.

principle and practice, are available and are essential to a college's construction of its "floor." From the floor up, however, the task of determining what is an upper-level course and how to evaluate it primarily belongs to any responsible school itself. By assuming this task, the college avoids both arbitrarily designated course numbers and leaving its teachers without some sense of upper-level propriety.

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